

Engaging with Museums' Past: Visitor Perspectives on Provenance Interpretation

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Abstract

Many Western museums are beginning to contend with the provenance, or lack thereof, of their collections, as they embrace decolonization initiatives. However, museums largely grapple with provenance issues internally, hiding problematic collections from the public in the interest of maintaining their reputation. But Western museums cannot make progress if they cannot acknowledge their past. This study builds upon scholarly debates on ethical stewardship and provenance disclosure to engage visitors as stakeholders in the conversation. This study investigates what museum visitors know about provenance and what they think about provenance interpretation. The researcher interviewed 64 adult English-speaking visitors at three Seattle museums to gather data on visitor perspectives. Participants were often unfamiliar with the term provenance, but aware of and passionate about museums' colonial collections and curious about unprovenanced objects. Overwhelmingly, participants supported interpretation in galleries that openly addressed problematic provenance, lack of provenance, and repatriation efforts. Participants highlighted a desire for greater transparency and accountability from museums. This study's findings raise further questions about how museums can respond to visitors' concerns and engage them in discussions on sensitive subjects. Further research is needed to understand more diverse museum visitors' perspectives from around the country, not just Seattle, and to develop best practices for provenance interpretation.

Problem

Museums can be magical spaces that bring together incredible objects and works of art from around the world. But how do priceless treasures from China, Peru, and the Congo get to a museum in New York? For many objects in American museums, that answer is unknown. For artifacts, often of cultural and historical importance, the Archaeological Institute of America estimates 85-90% are unprovenanced, meaning they lack a clear, documented origin and/or history of ownership (Bowman, 2008; Klawans, 2022). Looted objects are often unprovenanced (Bowman, 2008; Klawans, 2022). Museums' acquisition and display of unprovenanced, 'gray' artifacts legitimizes the trade in these suspect artifacts and increases their market price and demand, often increasing looting of cultural sites (Bowman, 2008; Yates & Graham, 2023). Looting removes precious cultural heritage from source communities and destroys the site itself, disrupting cultural practices and archaeological research (Lonetree, 2012; Yates & Brodie, 2023). Unprovenanced objects also lack critical context that allow researchers and source communities to connect a belonging with a community and history (Lonetree, 2012; Yates & Brodie, 2023). UNESCO and other international agencies argue that the illicit trade in artifacts remains one of the most pervasive international criminal enterprises (Yates & Brodie, 2023).

But the looting of cultural heritage is not a new problem, nor exclusive to the black market. Many Western museums built their collections through imperial conquest and, in turn, used those collections to justify white supremacy and colonialism (Duarte, 2024; Hicks, 2020; Lonetree, 2012). For formerly colonized peoples, collections represent more than just the theft of an object, but the exploitation and marginalization

of their communities by colonizers (Duarte, 2024; Lonetree, 2012; TEDx Talks, 2016). Though these objects may have been taken unethically from their source communities, international law only applies to antiquities removed from their country of origin after 1970 (Hauser-Schäublin & Prott, 2016; La Follette, 2016; Malaro & DeAngelis, 2013). Most belongings taken by violent colonial regimes are still legal to possess (Hauser-Schäublin & Prott, 2016; La Follette, 2016; Malaro & DeAngelis, 2013).

Anti-colonial activists and cultural heritage professionals have long called upon museums to address their complicity in the looting of cultural heritage, both modern and colonial (La Follette, 2017). Most discourse surrounds what to do with problematic collections, whether to repatriate or keep them, but there is also great discussion on what to say. Many academics have suggested public acknowledgement of object provenance as one practice to increase museum accountability. Although cultural heritage professionals have long discussed provenance, they have given little attention to what museum visitors think about ethical collection policy. Museums have an excellent platform to spread awareness about the harms of colonialism and modern looting and can engage visitors as stakeholders in preserving cultural heritage (Brodie et al., 2006; Rosenbaum, 2009). In addition, public protests suggest that the public cares about how the museums they visit acquired their collections, but museums have little actionable data to inform their decisions on if and/or how to communicate provenance information to visitors (Razzall, 2023). This article describes a research study designed to understand visitors' perceptions of how museums disclose provenance information for cultural collections.

Museums and (De)Colonialism

The re-evaluation of the provenance comes as part of a grander examination of the role museums hold within our society. Civil rights activists, in pushing for broad societal change, required museums to strive for greater inclusivity, diversity, equity, and accessibility for all (Bailey, 2019). Internally, new museological practice challenges museums to deconstruct hierarchical practices that privileged elites over the general public and presented the museum as the ultimate authority (Roberts, 2004). However, as museums have tried to become welcoming environments, they have remained “paralyzed by their embarrassing links to imperialism” (Wintle, 2016, p. 1493). In an effort to better serve their communities and regain relevance, many museums have begun decolonization initiatives (Wróblewska & Ariese, 2022). Decolonization as a term describes numerous practices and ideas, but does not itself have a clear definition. Māori rights activist Moana Jackson describes it as “the process of replacing one house with another,” completely removing the colonial structures in place to instead build new Indigenous frameworks (Elkington et al., 2020, p. 2). Indigenous scholars Tuck and Yang (2012) define decolonization as a “repatriation of Indigenous land and life” (p. 21). Within museums specifically, many focus on epistemic decolonization, the process in academia of dismantling Eurocentric systems of knowledge to construct spaces for Indigenous ways of knowing (Duarte & Belarde-Lewis, 2015; Vawda, 2019). Ho-Chunk scholar Amy Lonetree (2012) argues that the goal of museum decolonization is to “assist communities in their efforts to address the legacies of historical unresolved grief by speaking the hard truths of colonialism and thereby creating spaces for healing and understanding” (p. 4). Anthropologist and museologist Christina Kreps defines

decolonization as “acknowledging the historical colonial contingencies under which collections were acquired; revealing Eurocentric ideology and biases in the Western museum concept, discourse, and practice; and acknowledging and including diverse voices and multiple perspectives” (Wintle, 2016, p. 1502-1503). Regardless of specifics, decolonization does not merely mean including Indigenous people in museums, but changing how museums hold and use their power and authority (Elkington et al., 2020; Lonetree, 2012).

Decolonizing practices have largely focused on sharing authority and forming relationships with Indigenous communities and return or stewardship of Indigenous belongings. In practice, museums have incorporated Indigenous knowledge and cultural care into collections and archives; co-curated exhibits on Indigenous ways of life and colonialism; opened museum spaces and collections to Indigenous communities to reconnect with their belongings; and returned belongings to their communities of origin (Duarte & Belarde-Lewis, 2015; Lonetree, 2012; Tolia-Kelly & Raymond, 2020; Wintle, 2016; Wróblewska & Ariese, 2022). Museums have also reflected on their own colonial histories, relations to current neo-colonialism, and responsibilities to the public and to marginalized communities. Often “truth-telling” in decolonizing practices refers to confronting the harsh realities of colonialism in exhibits and programs (Lonetree, 2012; TEDx Talks, 2016). However, truth-telling can also refer to transparency on the part of the museum by acknowledging their own role in colonialism and the histories of their collections (Duarte, 2024; Wintle, 2016; Wróblewska & Ariese, 2022). Researching the history of collections and sharing that information is a “fundamental task for any decolonizing museum activity” (Wróblewska & Ariese, 2022, p. 83). Indeed, honesty and

transparency are principal values of museum ethics in general, not just in decolonization.

The Ethics and Realities of Collecting

Decolonization is not the first, nor the last, movement to question the ethics of museums and their collections. Academics, politicians, source communities, and more have critiqued and prescribed ethical and legal codes for museum collections since the first modern museums formed. Overwhelmingly, international and national institutions, led by white men, wrote these codes after great upheaval such as warfare or revolution (Spitra, 2020). Most modern provenance ethics concerns emerged after World War II (Gaudenzi & Swenson, 2017; Spitra, 2020; Tompkins & Flescher, 2020). Western colonial powers became more invested in preserving cultural heritage after Nazi looting of artworks throughout Europe and passed the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property (Gaudenzi & Swenson, 2017; Tompkins & Flescher, 2020). In addition, global upheaval during World War II set the stage for the mass independence of former colonies whose cultural heritage had been (and continues to be) removed to the imperial core and whose representatives put forth the UNESCO 1970 Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property (Bowman, 2008; Cuno, 2010; Spitra, 2020). In conjunction with civil rights movements and Indigenous rights movements (particularly the USA's passage of NAGPRA in 1990), these internal and external forces created the environment for museums to consider what it means to own cultural property (Duarte, 2024; Gaudenzi & Swenson, 2017; La Follette, 2016).

The question of who should own cultural heritage has a lengthy and unresolved discourse. International legal codes, such as the UNESCO 1970 Convention, only apply to cultural property removed from its country of origin after 1970 while retroactive laws can be more complicated and dependent on various factors, such as local law, precise wording of national cultural property laws, publication dates, and availability of evidence (Hauser-Schäublin & Prott, 2016; La Follette, 2016; Malero & DeAngelis, 2013). Some museum professionals, such as the 19 directors of major European and American museums who issued the *Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums* in 2002, argue that repatriation efforts and current cultural heritage laws go too far and undermine the purpose of museums (Cuno, 2010; Duarte, 2024; Hoffman, 2006). However, repatriation remains popular, spurred on by an evolving social landscape, including high-profile antiquities-trafficking cases, such as that of Marion True, former curator at the J. Paul Getty Museum; wartime looting of cultural heritage, particularly in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan; greater scholarship on museum collections and colonialism, such as the Sarr-Savoy Report; and increasing public pressure (Duarte, 2024; Gaudenzi & Swenson, 2017; Hauser-Schäublin & Prott, 2016; La Follette, 2016; Wróblewska & Ariese, 2022). Amidst these debates on ownership of cultural property, museums have invested far more into provenance research and re-evaluating their collection policies (Beurden, 2022; Duarte, 2024; Gaudenzi & Swenson, 2017; Hoffman, 2006; Hauser-Schäublin & Prott, 2016; La Follette, 2016; Tompkins & Flescher, 2020; Wróblewska & Ariese, 2022).

Unfortunately, as much of the discourse on ethical collection policy has focused on repatriation, academic and mainstream discourse has paid less attention to ethical

stewardship of unethically acquired objects. Museums should be concerned by this gap in discourse as even amongst institutions and governments fully willing to return looted objects, not every object can or will be repatriated. Source communities generally do not want European and American museums to repatriate every object (Beurden, 2022; Hauser-Schäublin & Prott, 2016; Hoffman, 2006). Not only do many countries not have sufficient space or resources to house collections should every object be returned, many communities wish to have their culture shared and displayed around the world on their own terms (Beurden, 2022; Hauser-Schäublin & Prott, 2016; Hoffman, 2006; Lonetree, 2012). In addition, numerous factors might prevent an ethical museum from repatriating objects, including but not limited to: diplomatic tensions between the country in which the museum resides and the source country; government corruption or neglect in the source country; responsibilities to local diasporic members of the source community; competing claims for repatriation between countries; and lack of trust between source communities and their government representatives, particularly amongst marginalized communities; (Beurden, 2022; Cuno, 2010; Gaudenzi & Swenson, 2017; Tolia-Kelly & Raymond, 2020; Wintle, 2016). Even when belongings are reunited with their rightful owners, those museums must still contend with how to steward post-colonial collections. Many repatriated collections go on display in museums within their source communities after return, but without interpretive text elaborating on the object's history and connections to colonialism (La Follette, 2016; Tompkins & Flescher, 2020). When museums avoid addressing the stories these objects hold, they deny their public opportunities for education and engagement.

Although the question of what museums should do with problematic collections, including unprovenanced objects, is unresolved, a majority of voices on all sides agree that museums should conduct provenance research and acknowledge when objects in their collections were acquired unethically or without documentation (Beurden, 2022; Cuno, 2010; Duarte, 2024; Gaudenzi & Swenson, 2017; Hoffman, 2006; Hauser-Schäublin & Prott, 2016; La Follette, 2016; Lonetree, 2012; Tompkins & Flescher, 2020; Wintle, 2016; Wróblewska & Ariese, 2022). However, the precise nature of that research and acknowledgement is unclear (Duarte, 2024; Gaudenzi & Swenson, 2017; Hoffman, 2006; La Follette, 2016; Tompkins & Flescher, 2020). Two major museum associations, the International Council of Museums (ICOM) and the American Alliance of Museums (AAM), have similar codes of ethics regarding provenance. ICOM's code calls on museums to conduct provenance research and due diligence (ICOM, 2017). In addition, the code states that museums should avoid displaying unprovenanced objects and should not support the illicit market in cultural property, even indirectly (ICOM, 2017). AAM's Collections code states that museum collections should be lawfully held and acquired in a manner to preserve natural and cultural resources and discourage illicit trade (AAM, 2017). In practice, provenance research is predominantly performed on new acquisitions instead of existing collections, disproportionately on artworks likely to have been looted by Nazis (Gaudenzi & Swenson, 2017; La Follette, 2016; Tompkins & Flescher, 2020; Yates & Graham, 2023). Most museum collections are unprovenanced and unprovenanced objects are still displayed (Bowman, 2008; Klawans, 2022). Both codes also state that museums should document their collections and make that information available, but do not determine how transparent museums

should be to the public, leaving provenance publication practices largely unstandardized (AAM, 2017; Gaudenzi & Swenson, 2017; ICOM, 2017; La Follette, 2016; Tompkins & Flescher, 2020). Indeed, many museums are reluctant to openly, publicly communicate how they built their collections, especially under colonialism, even if internally they are re-evaluating them (Duarte, 2024; Gaudenzi & Swenson, 2017; Hoffman, 2006; La Follette, 2016; Rosenbaum, 2009; Tompkins & Flescher, 2020; Yates & Graham, 2023).

Provenance disclosure varies widely amongst museums. Some museums include a page on their website detailing their collection and acquisition policies, such as the British Museum, Metropolitan Museum of Art (Met), Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures (ISAC), and the Brooklyn Museum (British Museum, n.d.; ISAC, n.d.; Met, n.d.; Rosenbaum, 2009). Museums such as the J. Paul Getty Museum, the Met, the Museum of Fine Arts Boston, Victoria & Albert Museum, Pitt Rivers Museum, and the British Museum provide provenance information for some objects on their website or online databases (La Follette, 2016; Wróblewska & Ariese, 2022). In addition, some museums are bringing provenance information into their galleries. Museums in New York state must now provide provenance disclosure after the passing of a 2022 law stating that artworks “known to have been stolen or forcibly sold under Nazi rule” must be prominently labeled (Mathis, 2022; Spivak, 2022). Exhibits at the Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery and Berlin’s Humboldt Forum have focused on examining object provenance and colonial context (Wilder, 2023; Wróblewska & Ariese, 2022). The British Museum, Victoria & Albert Museum, Pitt Rivers Museum, and Museum of Fine Art Boston are also reviewing labels on objects to include provenance and historical context (La Follette, 2016; Wróblewska & Ariese, 2022). However, much of these

provenance projects have been undertaken by large museums with abundant resources to commit to dedicated provenance staff, while smaller, less resourced museums often cannot commit to such labor and resource intensive projects. Although commendable, it is currently unknown what impact these changes will have on museums and their visitors.

What Visitors Know and What They Think

Amongst the discourse on provenance, museum professionals and academics have given little attention to their visitors. What research academics have published indicates that visitors care about collection ethics. Polling by the Archaeological Institute of America found that a majority of Americans support existing cultural heritage laws (La Follette, 2016). Master's thesis research by Makinster (2020) found that the majority of participants agreed with a recent decision by the J. Paul Getty Museum to repatriate looted antiquities to Italy, with 53% noting a desire to right past wrongs. In addition, her research also found a majority of participants thought that museums should tell visitors whether objects were stolen or looted and 45% found provenance information educational and important.

Beyond academic publications, major news publications indicate public interest in museum collection ethics. Public protests calling for repatriation and subsequent media coverage have received positive responses, such as those after Congolese activist Emery Mwazulu Diyabanza attempted to remove an African funeral pole from a Paris museum in protest (AP, 2020). Major news publications have also brought attention to museum collections and describe increasing public pressure on museums to change collection policies, particularly following the revelation of looted objects in their

collections (Bowley, 2022; Wilder, 2023; Woodman et al., 2023). A poll commissioned by the Parthenon Project found that a majority of British people would support the repatriation of the Parthenon Marbles from the British Museum to Greece (Razzall, 2023). Similar surveys by YouGov found 64% of Britons would support returning the marbles to Greece if the British Museum were lent other Greek artifacts and 68% thought that museum repatriation and cultural partnerships would have a positive impact on international relations (Razzall, 2023).

Popular media has also brought museums' unethical collections into the public eye. Comedy TV show *Last Week Tonight* aired an episode focused on looted objects in museum collections, particularly those in the British Museum (Horton, 2022). Stories about protagonists stealing looted artifacts from Western museums and returning them to source communities have been popular in recent video game *Relooted* and in comic books *Bronze Faces* and *Horizon Experiment: Finders Keepers* (Brooke, 2025; Jennings, 2025; Savage, 2026). Most notably, blockbuster movie *Black Panther* includes a scene in which antagonist Erik Killmonger confronts a museum curator over how a Wakandan artifact came to the museum's collection before stealing it (Haughin, 2018). Clearly the general public knows something about collection provenance and ethics. However, those general feelings give us little actionable data.

Study Purpose

The purpose of this study was to understand visitors' perceptions of how museums communicate provenance information for cultural collections. This study was guided by three key research questions:

- 1) What is the nature of museum visitors' understanding of artifact provenance?
- 2) What feelings do visitors experience in reaction to provenance interpretation?
- 3) What factors impact visitors' thoughts and feelings about provenance information?

Methods

Study Design

This research study utilized a survey design to give greater insight into broad trends in visitors' perspectives. The researcher interviewed participants to collect data and utilized structured interviews and an inter-reliability tested coding rubric to improve reliability.

Sampling

The researcher selected 64 participants through random sampling at three different Seattle area museums, including the Seattle Art Museum, the National Nordic Museum, and the Seattle Asian Art Museum. The Seattle Art Museum is a universal art museum in downtown Seattle. The National Nordic Museum is a heritage museum in the Ballard neighborhood. The Seattle Asian Art Museum is an art museum in Volunteer Park in the Capitol Hill neighborhood. The researcher asked every third adult leaving a museum site if they would be willing to be interviewed and if they could be recorded. If the person sampled was not an adult or did not speak English, the researcher thanked

them for their time and did not continue. Participants wrote down their own demographic information.

Participants

Participants are 64 English-speaking adult museum visitors to Seattle museums with cultural collections within the months of February and March. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 89 with a median of 38.5 years old. Over half of participants identified as exclusively female (63%, n=40), 23 identified as exclusively male, and 3 identified as non-binary or two-spirit. Over half of participants were white (59%, n=38) and 41% were people of color (n=26). Most participants were regular museum visitors with only 2 participants saying they attended museums rarely. 67% said they visited museums sometimes (n=43) and 30% said they visited often (n=19). Over two-thirds of participants lived in or around Seattle (73%, n=47) while 17 participants were visiting Seattle.

Data Analysis

Interviews generally lasted 10 to 15 minutes and generated three types of responses i) written demographic information; ii) Likert scales; iii) open-ended questions. The researcher transcribed interview recordings and aggregated data in one spreadsheet. The researcher analyzed open-ended questions, the majority of responses, using emergent coding to isolate similar themes across responses. A third party reviewed the coding rubric for inter-reliability testing. Open-ended questions allowed participants to answer as they wished and the researcher coded responses non-exclusively. The researcher coded responses such as “I don’t know” or “I couldn’t

say” as non-answers. As such, most questions do not have exactly 64 responses corresponding to each participant.

Ethics Statement and Positionality

I, the researcher, recognize that I am a white graduate student conducting research on human subjects on the lands of the Coast Salish peoples. Considering my privileged position and the institutional history of white researchers exploiting research participants, particularly participants of color, I strive to uphold the highest ethical standards in my own work. This includes acquiring clear consent to interview and record participants, not collecting any identifiable information, encouraging participants to self-identify their demographics, and ensuring participants were safe and comfortable throughout the process. I sought to make my research enjoyable and rewarding for all participants and for the museum host sites, to reciprocate the work and care they have provided me. I remain aware of my own ingrained biases and the colonial social structures that reinforce those same biases.

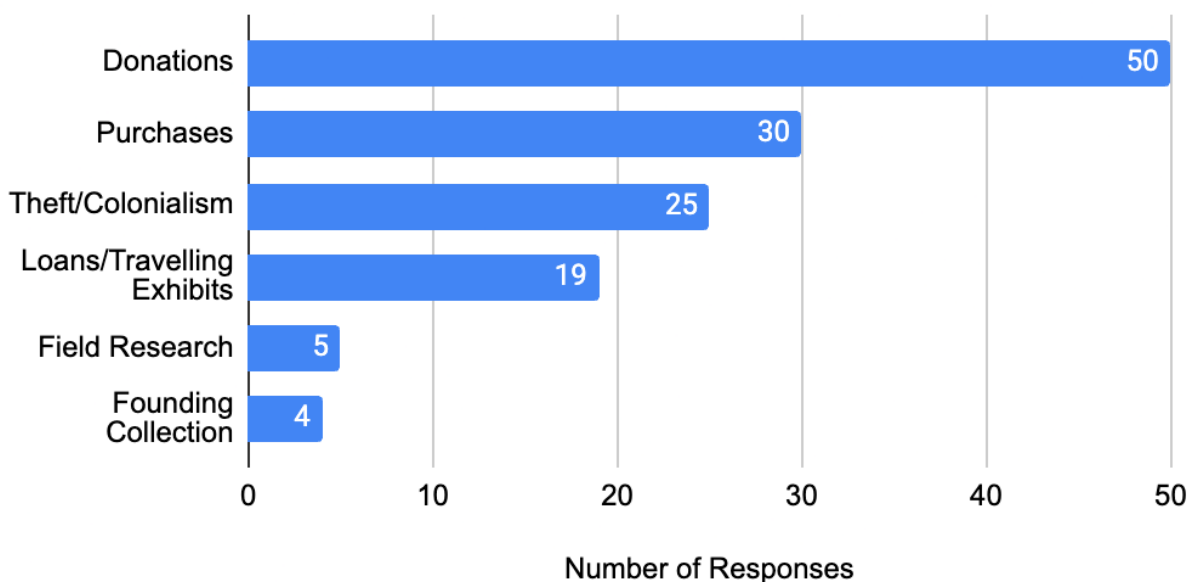
Results

Visitors’ Understanding of Artifact Provenance

When asked how museums acquire objects for their collections, participants gave a range of responses, as seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Distribution of responses to the question, “How do museums acquire their collections?”



Most commonly, people referenced donations. Interestingly, those who referenced theft and/or colonialism tended to frame it historically (n=14), saying things like, “Historically, they just stole them,” or “In the past, I would say it was taken a lot more,” or “Colonialism for the older ones, just taking it and not returning it.” Few indicated that this was something that still happened today. In addition, a number of participants referenced the British Museum during the interview when discussing unethical practices and colonial history. For example, one participant commented, “There's also, you know, the British Museum is accused of just stealing shit.” Another said, “If you're British, you just take it.”

The researcher asked participants how they engage with information about an object's provenance on the label. The researcher showed participants a sample object label from within the corresponding museum and asked what they could learn about the

object from the label. Only 5 participants used the word provenance to describe the information, but all of them said they could learn something about the object's history or origins from the label, referring to the information about its provenance. The researcher then asked participants what they thought the term provenance meant. Almost half of study participants (45%, n=29) said they had heard of the term provenance before; for the remaining 55% (n=35), provenance wasn't a familiar term. Participants commonly responded "no, not at all" or "I have not, no."

Of those familiar with the term provenance, 38% (n=11) defined it as an object's history or biography. For example, one participant described it as "the idea of, like, where the piece came from and how it got there. It's kind of telling that story." 28% (n=8) defined provenance in terms of an object's origin, saying things like "that's where something came from." Another 28% (n=8) highlighted past ownership or authentication. These participants made comments like "an artifact that's being authenticated."

Most participants (74%, n=47) said that they almost always pay attention to provenance information when they read an object label; 17% (n=11) said they pay attention to it sometimes; and 9% of participants (n=6) said they do not pay attention to or care about provenance when they read an object label. More than half of participants (55%, n=35) referenced personal interest as a reason for noticing provenance when reading an object label. In addition, nearly a quarter of participants (23%, n=15) said that they paid attention to provenance interpretation out of ethical concerns regarding museums acquisitions policies. Interestingly, almost two thirds of participants (64%, n=41) said that regardless of their own behavior, they assume that other museum visitors generally do not pay attention to interpretive text at all, including provenance.

One participant said “I think they more just show up. They look at the thing and then leave.” Participants positively correlated willingness to read interpretive text with interest in provenance.

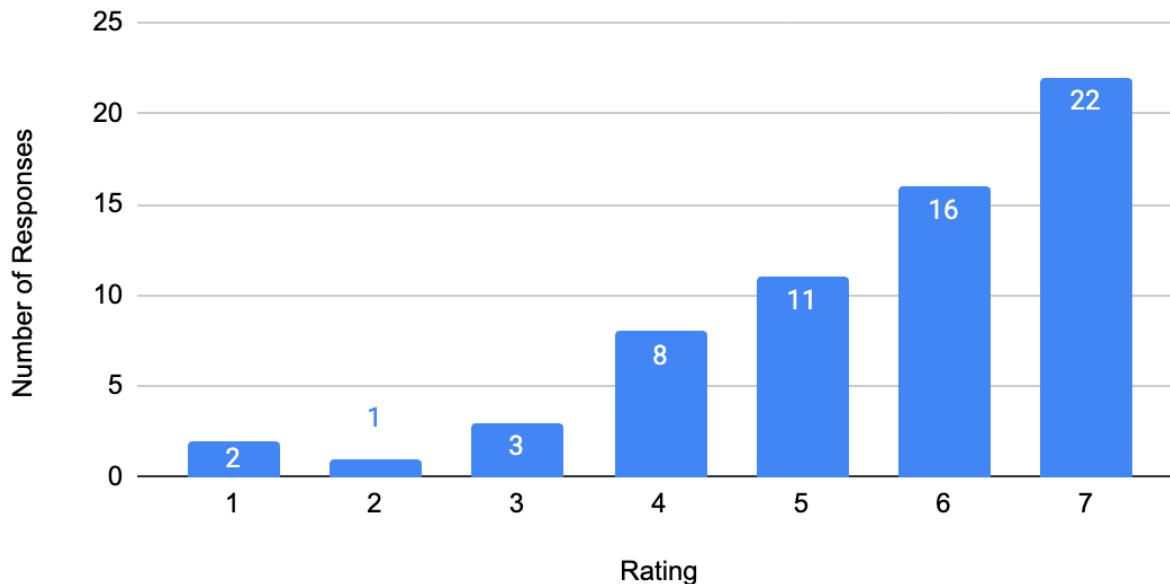
A majority of participants (55%, n=35) said they looked to the provenance information for context or historical background on the object. One participant said “I love getting little pieces of history.” Another said “The better [labels] help contextualize the thing that I'm looking at.” When the researcher asked what participants would want to add to an object label about provenance, participants (33%, n=21) commonly responded that they wanted more context. In addition, 8 participants (12.5%) said they wanted provenance interpretation (e.g. “I just want to know how it was acquired. If it was, like, ethically sourced or not.”).

The researcher asked participants how much it matters to them how the museum acquired their collections and instructed participants to rate their opinion on a 7-point scale where 1 was not at all and 7 was absolutely. Figure 2 shows their ratings. Participants' average rating was 5.56.

Almost half of participants (48%, n=31) when asked to explain their rating referenced looted and/or colonial collections. One participant said, “I hate the British Museum. They steal so much, they don't give it back, it's very immoral. Very immoral.” Another participant said, “I mean if you murdered somebody and you took their stuff, like it's a little messed up, you know? I mean, I understand older colonialism; we weren't there doing it, but still it's the moral of it.” In addition, some participants said that they care about how museums are handling colonial collections and repatriation efforts. One participant said, “I care more about what they're planning to do in the future to rectify

Figure 2

Participants ratings of how much it matters to them how the museum acquired their collections (Scale=1-7, where 1 is not at all and 7 is completely).



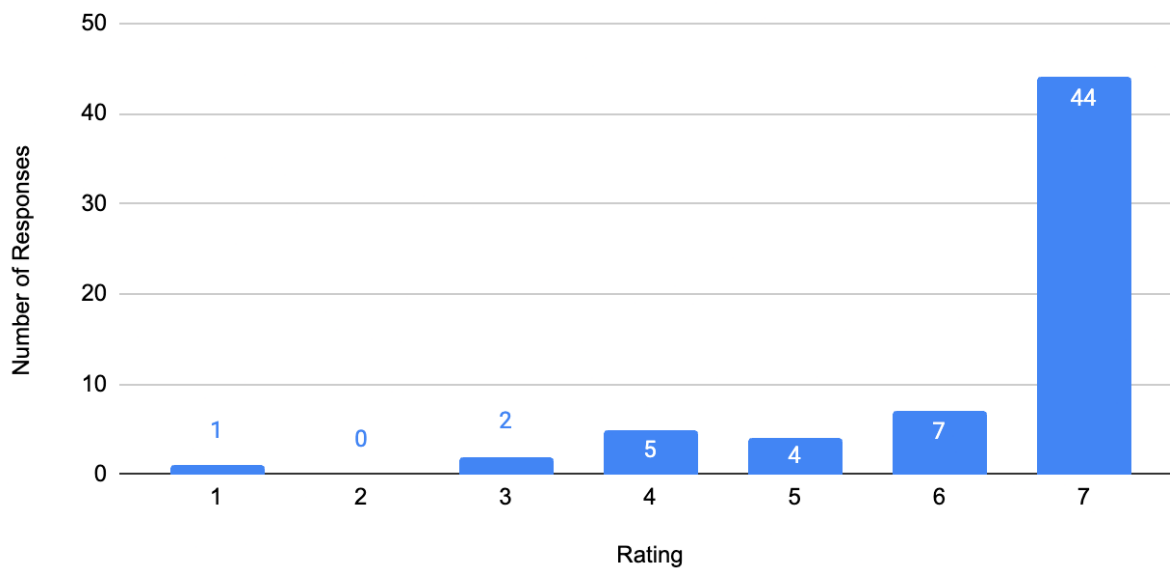
things.” Another participant said, “I do care and I do hope that, like, the cultures that they come from they do get those things back. Or at least that they make amends or, like, try to get their permission to keep them.”

Visitors’ Perspectives on Provenance Disclosure and Interpretation

The researcher asked, “Do you think that museums should provide provenance information for objects that are known to have been stolen or forcibly sold?” and asked participants to rate their responses on a 7-point scale (See Figure 3). Participants’ average response was 6.30.

Figure 3

Participants' feelings about whether museums should provide provenance information for objects that are known to have been stolen or forcibly sold (Scale=1-7, where 1 is not at all and 7 is absolutely).



When asked to explain their rating, 39% of participants (n=25) said it was an issue of accountability. One participant said, “Are you going to take responsibility for the past? Are you going to correct this or are you just going to say, ‘Well they did it, I didn’t?’” Another said that “describing the process is a good source of some accountability.” Others highlighted a desire for transparency (25%, n=16). A participant said, “They can, you know, at least be honest about it.” However, 3 other participants expressed that they did not trust museums to acknowledge problematic provenance or take accountability for historical injustice.

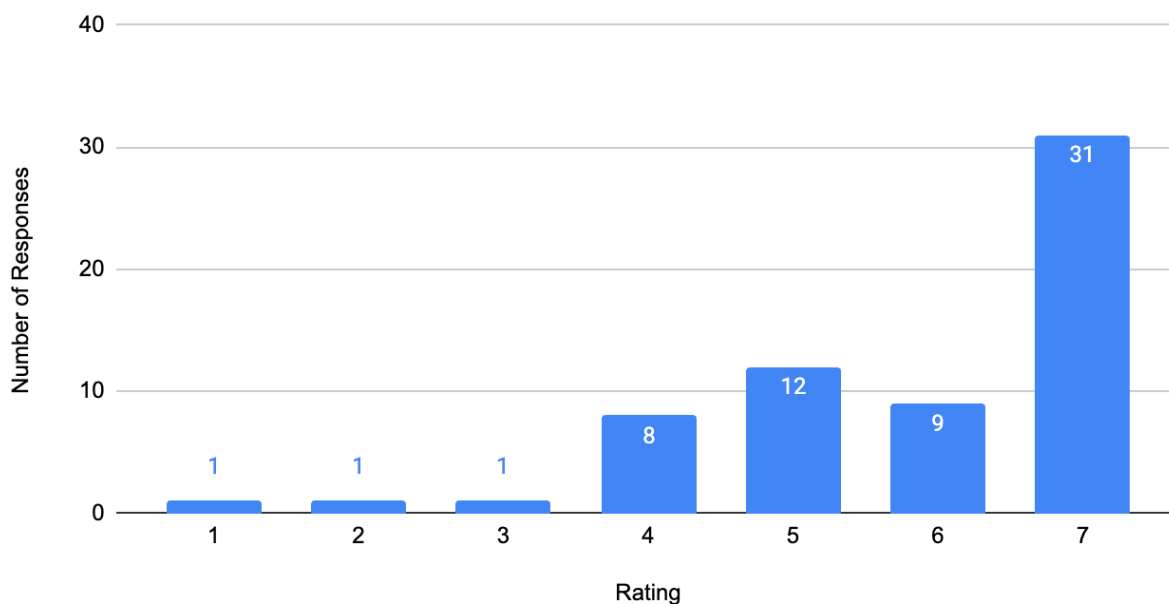
Another 30% of participants (n=19) referenced the educational value of providing provenance for looted works. They said that provenance was an important part of the context and historical background that they wanted to see in interpretive text. One

participant said, “What's the point of going to a museum if it's not looking at historical pieces and finding more context?” Some participants (14%, n=9) also said that addressing the provenance of colonial collections would be an opportunity for visitors to learn about colonialism and counter popular narratives minimizing colonial harm.

Next, the researcher asked, “Do you think that museums should provide clarifying information for objects that have a disputed or unknown history?” Figure 4 shows the distribution of ratings from 1 to 7. Participants’ average response was 5.86.

Figure 4

Participants’ feelings about whether museums should provide clarifying information for objects that have a disputed or unknown history (Scale=1-7, where 1 is not at all and 7 is absolutely).



When asked to explain their rating, 28% of participants (n=18) highlighted transparency. One participant said, “I don't think museums will ever be hurt by transparency.” Another participant said, “I think that's just like something that's very, it's

very honest.” Unlike the previous question, participants did not express a sense that museums need to be accountable for unprovenanced objects. However, 3 participants said that they would not trust that a museum did not have provenance for an object and would suspect that such an object had been looted. The most common response (33%, n=21) was simply that participants thought it would be interesting. One participant said, “I think disputed stories are again interesting to have. I'll throw it all in there.” Another participant said, “That makes it mysterious and interesting.”

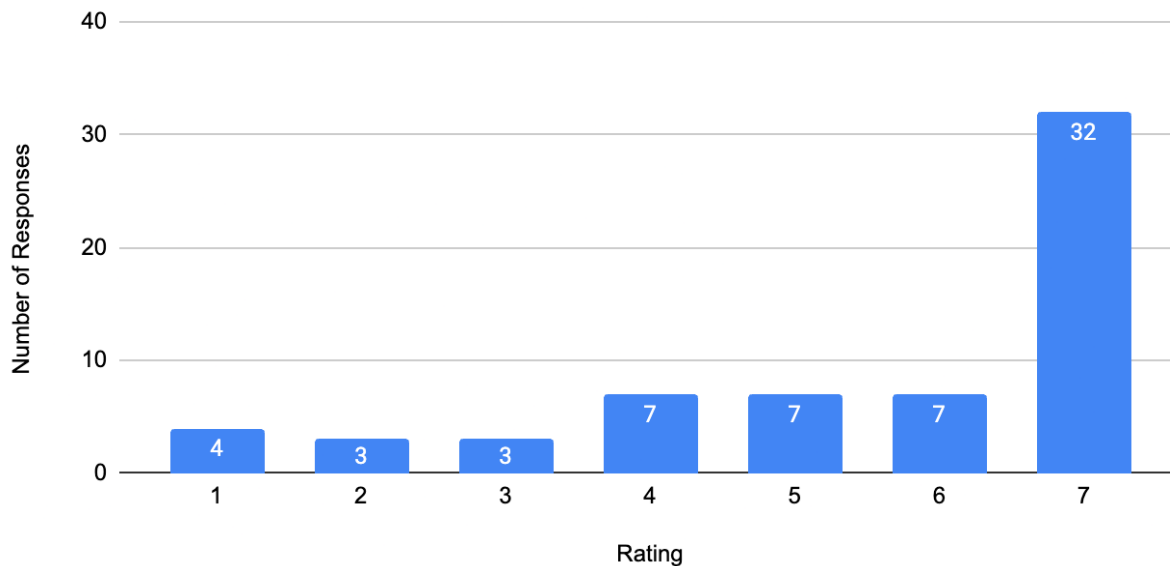
Participants also described educational value to exploring uncertainty. 9 participants said that acknowledging gaps or disputed periods in history would deepen understanding of history. For example, one participant said, “It also displays that history is not always concrete. And I think it's really nice to kind of have it be more upfront that there are, there are pieces that you can't know. There's uncertainty.” Another participant referred to her own teaching, saying, “I'm teaching children history, you know. Things are not, we're not going to go black and white. This might not be-this might be an instance where we don't know and that's okay to be in the unknown.” 3 other participants highlighted that acknowledging gaps in the museum's knowledge could provide an opportunity for people to come forward with new information or begin an investigation.

The researcher asked, “Do you think that museums should provide provenance information for objects that have been requested to be returned to their community of origin?” Ratings are presented in Figure 5, on a scale from 1-7 where 1 was not at all and 7 was absolutely. Participants' average response was 5.24.

Figure 5

Participants' feelings about whether museums should provide provenance information for objects that have been requested to be returned to their community of origin

(Scale=1-7, where 1 is not at all and 7 is absolutely)



When asked to explain their rating, much like the question on stolen objects, accountability and transparency were common factors. One quarter of participants (25%, n=16) said that they would want museums to disclose repatriation requests as a form of accountability. One participant said, “It goes back to the accountability. That feels like you're just pointedly being disrespectful if you're not even saying they want this back.” 20% of participants (n=13) said that it was important for museums to be transparent.

Some participants (n=8) said that discussing repatriation requests was irrelevant to understanding the object itself and thus not necessary in interpretation. One participant said, “That's irrelevant to the art, to the origination of itself, because that's kind of... Like a political... It's more of a political kind of issue than, like, the history of the

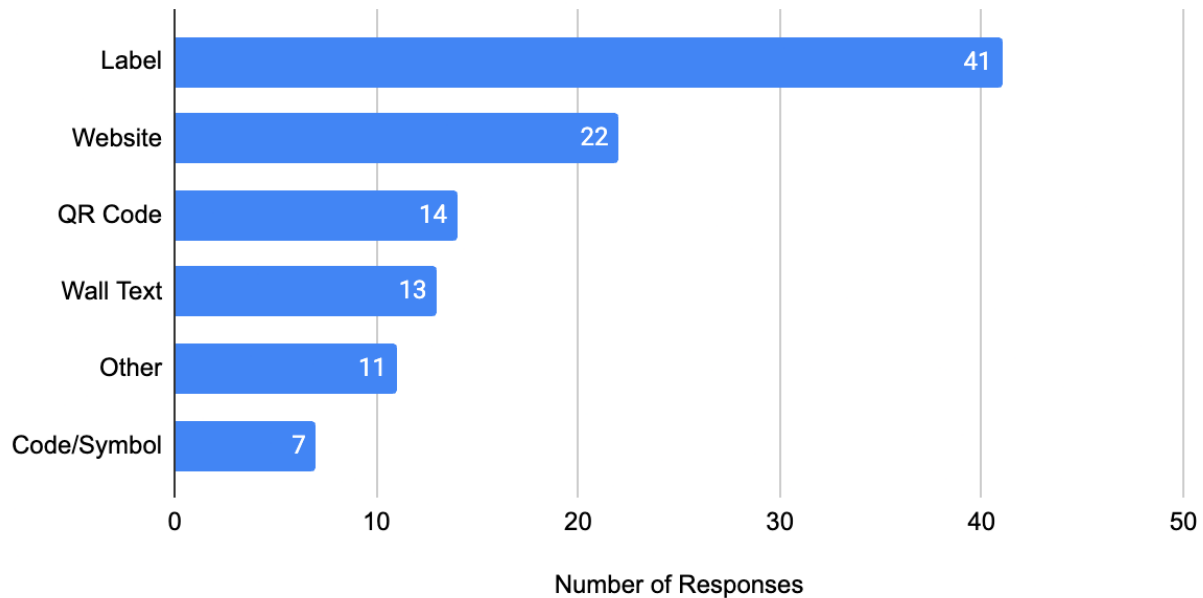
object.” Another participant said that was “too much information,” because, “I think that's the deal with the museum and whoever is requesting it.” Some participants (19%, n=12) also questioned the legitimacy of some repatriation requests and said that the museum would have to verify the request before acting. One participant said, “I think there are a lot of crackpots who are going out trying to say, ‘Oh, you know, that was my great-grandmother's piece,’ but they don't have any way of saying that or proving that.” Another participant said, “If it's someone irrational with no evidence claiming that it's theirs and they're asking for it back, I don't think they should be required to display that.”

Participants also referenced a sense of public involvement regarding issues of repatriation that provenance interpretation did not evoke. 6 participants said that interpretation for repatriation requests would open the museum to public feedback, for better or for worse. One participant who supported repatriation disclosure said that “feedback from visitors, it might change a tie.” Another participant said that they would worry about “kind of the uprising of people. Well, like, you know, whether or not it's, like, a peaceful boycott of the museum, or vandalizing the museum, maybe as a result.” Other participants referenced a sense of personal responsibility. One participant said, “I think that shouldn't be our fault.” Another participant said, “Don't put that problem on me. I just came here.”

Finally, when the researcher asked, “Where would you expect to find provenance information for a museum object?” most participants said that they would want textual interpretation available in the museum. Figure 6 shows participants' responses.

Figure 6

Distribution of responses to the question, “Where would you expect to find provenance information for a museum object?”



Although 64% of participants said that they would expect to see some provenance information on an object label, many participants also expressed some concern that labels giving provenance interpretation for each object would become too lengthy for visitors to engage with. Half of the participants (50%, n=32) said that they would want some other form of in-gallery interpretation such as a QR code or link, code or symbol on a label, brochure, audio guide, docent tours, or entry text like a land acknowledgement. In addition, the researcher coded responses such as “right next to the piece” or “on some kind of label” as the label, but participants may have been referring to any interpretive text instead of specifically object labels. In previous questions, some participants hedged their answers over concern that including each piece of provenance information would be too much on a label. One participant said,

“I’m of two minds. One is just to have it all out in the open... I also recognize that people have sort of different bandwidths.” Another participant said they wanted “just to have, you know, something, but maybe not like full [provenance].”

Overall, many participants referenced a desire for transparency (55%, n=35) and/or accountability (53%, n=34) in provenance interpretation in cultural collections. Almost a quarter of participants (22%, n=14) highlighted the educational value of provenance interpretation, evoking museums as a site of lifelong learning. Participants struggled to balance a desire for provenance interpretation easily visible while visiting with the need for labels to be a reasonable length to read. Participant responses did not significantly correlate with any demographic factors. For all Likert scale questions, each demographic category’s average ratings were within a +/-0.5 range.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to understand visitors’ perceptions of how museums communicate provenance information for cultural collections. 64 interviews resulted in the key findings outlined below by research question.

1) What is the nature of museum visitors’ understanding of artifact provenance?

This study found that a majority of museum visitors are not familiar with the term “provenance,” but have some familiarity with the issues of colonial collections and problematic provenance. Although participants had awareness of colonial collections, they largely did not reference modern looting or unprovenanced collections as ethical

issues within museum collections. This study expanded on findings by Makinster (2020) which focused on museum visitors' perceptions of antiquities repatriation. Makinster found that a majority of participants had some awareness of repatriation with over half being familiar with repatriation in a museum context. It is reasonable to assume that if museum visitors are aware of museum repatriation that they would be aware of the problematic provenance of some museum collections. This study's results are consistent with Makinster's. These findings are also consistent with informal polling and news coverage of repatriation controversies which often focus on high-profile colonial collections like the Benin Bronzes or Parthenon Marbles. Multiple articles discussed increasing public attention on museums' acquisitions and public pressure to change collection and repatriation policies (Bowley, 2022; Razzall, 2023; Wilder, 2023; Woodman et al., 2023).

2) What feelings do visitors experience in reaction to provenance interpretation?

This study found that museum visitors, regardless of demographics, supported providing provenance interpretation for stolen, forcibly sold, and unprovenanced objects. Visitors cited a desire for greater transparency and accountability, as well as the educational and contextual value of discussing provenance. Many of the same articles that indicated museum visitors have some prior knowledge of problematic provenance also suggest how visitors might feel about provenance interpretation. Makinster (2020) found that most museum visitors supported repatriation of looted antiquities and public polling has found a majority of participants support repatriation (Razzall, 2023). It would be reasonable to assume that people supportive of repatriation

would be interested in provenance interpretation. Indeed, Makinster found that a majority of participants believed it was important that museums tell visitors about objects in their collections that were looted or stolen. Makinster also found that visitors valued transparency and accountability and thought provenance interpretation would be educational.

In addition to corroborating existing research, this study found that many museum visitors are aligned with the prevailing academic and legal ethical standards on provenance disclosure. Overwhelmingly, museum professionals and academics say that museums should acknowledge problematic provenance or lack of provenance in their collections and conduct provenance research (Beurden, 2022; Cuno, 2010; Duarte, 2024; Gaudenzi & Swenson, 2017; Hoffman, 2006; Hauser-Schäublin & Prott, 2016; La Follette, 2016; Lonetree, 2012; Tompkins & Flescher, 2020; Wintle, 2016; Wróblewska & Ariese, 2022). ICOM and AAM codes of ethics also state that museums should document their collections (including provenance) and make that information available (AAM, 2017; ICOM, 2017).

However, this study finds that museum visitors' and museum professionals' perspectives differ in practice. Wróblewska and Ariese discuss the few cases of in-gallery provenance interpretation, but museums largely publish provenance information and their collection policies, if they publish them at all, online as pages on their websites or in online databases (British Museum, n.d.; ISAC, n.d.; La Follette, 2016; Met, n.d.; Rosenbaum, 2009; Wróblewska & Ariese, 2022). Although many participants did suggest publishing provenance information online, most participants wanted provenance interpretation in the museum itself. In addition, most provenance research

is conducted on new acquisitions instead of existing collections, with a focus on Nazi-era spoliation (Gaudenzi & Swenson, 2017; La Follette, 2016; Tompkins & Flescher, 2020; Yates & Graham, 2023). Participants, however, largely focused on historical, colonial collections when discussing provenance and expressed greater interest in addressing those collections.

Limitations

The participants in the study represent just a small sample of museum visitors. Participants were all visitors at museums in Seattle, a progressive city. Participants were also predominantly white and female. The researcher only conducted interviews in English with adults. As a result, many populations are unrepresented or under-represented by the study sample. Museum visitors of color and visitors who are not fluent in English have greater insights that were not captured in this study. This study also did not investigate how children and teens might engage with sensitive and complicated subjects like colonial collections or unprovenanced objects. In addition, museums outside of Seattle or other progressive cities might have visitors with differing opinions and expectations of those museums.

Another sample limitation is participants' self-selection. Although the researcher used random sampling to recruit participants, not all people approached for an interview agreed to participate. As a result, findings might reflect some biases of convenience sampling. In particular, the sample represents museum visitors who stopped to answer questions, visitors who are more likely to have stronger opinions than people who chose not to participate.

Implications

This study improves our understanding of museum visitors' perspectives on provenance interpretation and broadens the discourse on how museums should address problematic provenance. Results showed that museum visitors are aware of problematic cultural collections and care about ethical collections stewardship. Results also showed that museum visitors are interested in provenance and want provenance interpretation in the museum, even just to acknowledge the lack of provenance.

Research

While the results of this study are promising, more research in this field is required. This study only surveyed museum visitors in Seattle, the majority of whom lived in the area. Museum professionals and academics could conduct future research at museums across the country to gain insight on a national scale and could better gauge what factors influence museum visitors' thoughts. The survey design of this study provides a general scope of museum visitors' perspectives, but a more in-depth study would deepen our understanding of the subject. A future study might examine case studies of provenance interpretation and how visitors respond to different approaches to interpretation.

Practice

This study's findings can inform interpretation and transparency in museums with cultural collections. By understanding what museum visitors care about, museum professionals, particularly those in interpretation, exhibit design, and curation, can better

address the communities they serve and engage visitors in difficult conversations. One major finding was visitors' interest in clear, honest signage discussing provenance. Museum staff planning new exhibits might consider including interpretive text on provenance and collection policy and providing opportunities for visitors to learn more online or in programming. Another finding was visitors' desire for more in-depth historical background on object labels and an association between provenance and context. When writing labels, museum staff could incorporate provenance information to give greater insight into what we do or do not know about the story of an object and how that impacts study of the object. Museum staff can also incorporate more ambiguity into their interpretive text, particularly for unprovenanced objects. Participants referenced the intrigue of mysterious, unprovenanced collections and the educational value of recognizing the incompleteness of our knowledge on an object or subject.

Participants also largely referenced colonial collections when discussing provenance. Museums might consider shifting priorities to undertake more provenance research on older collections, particularly those from formerly and/or currently colonized peoples. Museums might also consider publishing the provenance research that they currently do in the interest of transparency and accountability, as well as to better educate museum visitors on black market trade in antiquities and wartime spoliation.

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Appendix 1

Interview Guide

Hi! Would you be interested in participating in a short interview? I'm a graduate student at the University of Washington doing research on what museum visitors think about museum signage.

Although we are at [museum site], my thesis is for museum studies. So these questions are not about [museum site], but museums generally.

1. All of the artwork/artifacts that you saw here today have labels beside them that look like this (show them an example of a label from the museum site).
 - a. What knowledge do you take away from this label?
 - b. Is there any information you wish had been included on the label? If so, what information?
 - c. I'm interested in this piece of information specifically (point to the provenance). What does this tell you?
2. [If they didn't use the word provenance], have you heard of the word provenance before? How would you describe what it means?
3. [If they did use the word provenance] you used the word provenance earlier. How would you describe what that means?
4. During your visit today, did you pay attention to the provenance information on any of the labels that you read?

- a . If yes, why? Why did you notice it/pay attention to it?
 - b . If no, why? Why did you not notice it/pay attention to it?
- 5. Do you think the average museum visitor pays attention to the provenance information on the labels that they read? Why/why not?
- 6. In what ways do you think museums acquire their collections?
- 7. On a scale from 1-7, where 1 is not at all and 7 is completely, how much does it matter to you how the museum acquired their collections? Explain your rating.
- 8. On a scale from 1-7, where 1 is completely disagree and 7 is completely agree, do you think that museums should provide provenance information for objects that are known to have been stolen or forcibly sold? Explain your rating.
- 9. On a scale from 1-7, where 1 is completely disagree and 7 is completely agree, do you think that museums should provide clarifying information for objects that have a disputed or unknown history? Explain your rating.
- 10. On a scale from 1-7, where 1 is completely disagree and 7 is completely agree, do you think that museums should provide provenance information for objects that have been requested to be returned to their community of origin? Explain your rating.
- 11. Where would you expect to find provenance information for a museum object?
- 12. Basic demographic information:
 - a. Age
 - b. Gender
 - c. Race/Ethnicity
 - d. Frequency of museum visits: (Often, Sometimes, Rarely)

e. Local or tourist

Appendix 2

Coding Rubric

1. All of the artwork/artifacts that you saw here today have labels beside them that look like this (show them an example of a label from the museum site).

- a. What knowledge do you take away from this label?

- i. **Context/Background** e.g.

1. "what's the context behind the piece, or the historical value behind it"
2. "the story behind it"
3. "I am interested in like sort of context, historical context, and just any kind of like there's political context."

- ii. **Tombstone** e.g.

1. "Who the artist is, what's the artist's title is, how long ago it was made, the material of the object"
2. "I get the date, I get the artist"
3. "Where it was from. Who made it? When did they make it?"

- iii. **Meaning/Message** e.g.

1. "when we tie it back into the meaning of the piece and have something that's like a little bit more"
2. "I noticed within the Aboriginal painting artwork, there was descriptions of what you should be seeing."

iv. Artistic Intent/Process e.g.

1. "I like to get the idea of what artists had when they created them, or why they created this piece of art in particular."
2. "what the artist is trying to convey the structure perspective and just what i'm supposed to see"
3. "I feel like sometimes you get maybe what the artist is referencing, right? What are they trying to invoke or what inspired them?"

b. Is there any information you wish had been included on the label? If so, what information?

i. More context e.g.

1. "if all pieces had a little bit of context"
2. "I feel like more information about the place that it's from."
3. "if like let's say an object was using like traditional like events. Talk a little bit more about like the cultural like components."

ii. Exhibit Connections e.g.

1. "there is always some sort of tie to the gallery. It's like, I think it carries a good chunk of what you're supposed to see, and what you're supposed to gain from it."
2. "like when you enter a room it just like has like a overarching like theme of like what each room is about"

iii. Trivia e.g.

1. “not necessarily about the artwork but about if they reference the kind of stone or something. If it's referencing like a, you know, folk tale”
2. “Maybe some interesting facts, something which I didn't know about it. Like kind of a fun, you know, unexpected...”

iv. Curatorial Process e.g.

1. “Either the curator or whoever has put the show together, I'm interested when it's a personal collection, interested in both the owners, what caused them to be interested in a particular piece.”
2. “So tell me why this object is on display in this and so what maybe key pieces I should be looking at in order to like appreciate the context that it is in the museum”

v. Visual/Graphic e.g.

1. “I would like to add like the map,”
2. “at the bottom of that sign in the corner, it was a picture of the temple. And then it kind of had like a little square to see where it was... definitely visual graphics”
3. “The only thing I would maybe add because I'm a visual person is a little image of what this is describing.”

vi. Provenance e.g.

1. “So for me, it's more, I always want a little bit more, especially with, like, the context of how the art came to be here.”
 2. “I don't know if archaeological history is the right thing, but maybe a lot of these are obviously relics. Sometimes they do, sometimes they don't say where they're found, like really where the site was, which is interesting, especially these days, thinking about returning.”
 3. “Maybe the provenance of an object, like who owned it, you know, because the label always says where it's from, from the beginning, and you know where it is now, but there might be a 500 year gap in between kind of where it was.”
 4. “I just want to know how it was acquired. If It was like ethically sourced or not.”
- c. I'm interested in this piece of information specifically (point to the provenance). What does this tell you?
2. [If they didn't use the word provenance], have you heard of the word provenance before?
- a. **Origin/Date** e.g.
 - i. “Time stamp plus”
 - ii. “Like the era”
 - b. **Key facts** e.g.
 - i. “the facts”

- ii. “like, an index almost. I think about what you would see at the end of a book, where you would look up a key word, a key date, something along those lines.”
- iii. “Basic identifying information”

c. History/Biography e.g.

- i. “Historical context”
- ii. “Well I think it's how the artwork got to the museum. I guess the the timing was made.”
- iii. “It's almost biographical. Or just like the history of that object.”

3. [If they did use the word provenance] you used the word provenance earlier. How would you describe what that means?

a. Origin e.g.

- i. “The information about something's origin.”
- ii. “Origin. Source.”
- iii. “where something came from”

b. Ownership e.g.

- i. “whose hands it went through, who owned it”
- ii. “Documented history of the origin of this piece with a chain of verifiable documents. A chain of ownership.”

c. Biography e.g.

- i. “it's the story of how the piece of art got to be where it is”
- ii. “the idea of like where the piece came from and how it got there. it's kind of telling that story”

d. Authenticity e.g.

- i. “like an artifact that's being authenticated”
- ii. “Confirmation of the history of the work”
- iii. “gives you the details you need to put it in a place in time to verify that this is exactly what people say it is.”

4. During your visit today, did you pay attention to the provenance information on any of the labels that you read?

- a . If yes, why? Why did you notice it/pay attention to it?
- b . If no, why? Why did you not notice it/pay attention to it?

i. Interest e.g.

- 1. “I don't think it lands as much. You know, it doesn't resonate as much”
- 2. “i mean some of it's just intellectual curiosity”
- 3. “Not as much. No, no. Just not as interesting.”

ii. Context e.g.

- 1. “it helps me understand what I'm looking at and adds depth to my like knowledge or understanding of the piece as I'm watching or receiving it.”
- 2. “It helps fill out the bigger picture of a piece”
- 3. “Because I think that's part of the object's story.”

iii. Curatorial Process e.g.

1. "why this stuff how much how much time or detail was spent getting these things especially when it comes from a multitude of areas"
2. "And so it also helps me understand why it was something that it should be in a museum."

iv. Ethics e.g.

1. "there's definitely cultural sensitivity to like and stuff like that or wondering you know if yeah to the remnants of colonialism how was it obtained was it obtained sort of fairly"
 2. "I often wonder, what were the circumstances in which that creator sold it or passed it on? It may have been, well like in Holocaust Germany, so many things were stolen. And people still are fighting for the provenance, to prove that they had those things. That's important to me."
 3. "I like to know that it came to this place without harming people because sometimes it is, like, it is a war, wartime thing, or some people acquired it illegally. "
5. Do you think the average museum visitor pays attention to the provenance information on the labels that they read? Why/why not? (**Same as above**)
6. In what ways do you think museums acquire their collections?

a. Donations e.g.

- i. "So whether it's an outright gift while the donor's still alive, or whether it's a gift of the remaining family members later, or whether it's gifts of money"
- ii. "Oh, from rich collectors. Donations from rich people."

b. Loans/Travelling Exhibits e.g.

- i. "But I think a lot of the times they get them on loan from people who own them. Or from other museums."
- ii. "they do circle around different museums where they have, like there are some permanent exhibits, but they're temporary ones and those temporary ones keep circling around different museums."
- iii. "A lot of the new ones like the Burke Museum they partner with some of the indigenous groups out here and so they like borrow it and then give it back"

c. Purchases e.g.

- i. "But also auctions?"
- ii. "acquisitions if they have the money."
- iii. "they, you know, travel around and purchase."

d. Founding Collection e.g.

- i. "not donating his items to some particular area, but donating the entire estate. Yeah, to become a museum."

e. Field Collection e.g.

- i. "I don't know if they get any from governments, but it seems like mostly not. It depends on what it is. If it's like archaeology."

- ii. "I honestly don't know how many, like, new discoveries there are nowadays, but I would assume and hope so that there are still."
- iii. "just out hunting with your own staff out there collecting."

f. Theft/Colonialism e.g.

- i. "A lot of them steal them. The British Museum comes to mind immediately."
- ii. "but then foreign stuff would have been a lot of it was clearly, you know, taken"
- iii. "some of them are from history I guess they got them historically you know, when there were no rules and there were no international laws"
- iv. "I feel like my gut reaction, like the first thing I think of is like a lot of like colonialist projects that sort of harvest objects from cultures that are not theirs."

7. On a scale from 1-7, where 1 is not at all and 7 is completely, how much does it matter to you how the museum acquired the artwork/artifacts? Explain your rating.

a. Stolen/looted works e.g.

- i. "if they don't say anything about where it came from, I enjoy it less because I just assumed that they acquired it through some imperialist process."
- ii. "I hate the British Museum. They steal so much, they don't give it back."

- iii. "if I know that they just like ripped it out of somebody's culture."

b. Concern for artists e.g.

- i. "art is traditionally been something that is produced by people that are kind of on the fringe of society not necessarily always the most represented in society [and it] can be kind of either erasing them and taking their things and putting it somewhere"
- ii. "because like if someone is like on the street selling it they're just like took it and then like give them appropriate compensation"

c. The ends justify the means e.g.

- i. "Because there are situations where like, you look at like how the Taliban destroyed really important historical artwork. Yeah, that should have been preserved. And so there's a part of me as like, maybe we need to just keep it safe."
- ii. "I think it's interesting to know, but somehow irrelevant how they acquire [it]. The good thing is that it's in the museum."
- iii. "i just want to see it. So that's why I think it's there I definitely want to see it no matter where it's from."
- iv. "There's also um something to be said for having access yeah and so even though I think it should be called out how they got it but I also think there's something to be said for the fact that I can have access to art that I wouldn't normally have access to."

d. Inaction e.g.

- i. "that isn't the forefront of my mind. It matters but it's maybe not like it's important but I can't say that that's exactly my first thought."
- ii. "I do care how you acquired it, but I can't really control how museums acquire pieces"
- iii. "Where I hedge is that if I only went to museums that I thought source things ethically there'd be a lot of stuff I would never be able to see and so I don't choose not to go places."

8. On a scale from 1-7, where 1 is completely disagree and 7 is completely agree, do you think that museums should provide provenance information for objects that are known to have been stolen or forcibly sold? Explain your rating.

a. Expected/Standard e.g.

- i. "i think it's tending to be more common that is done i'm especially thinking of the southwest yeah with the artifacts often it does list that this was found somewhere and then someone took it and now it's here"
- ii. "I think the expectation is to, that if at some point the piece of art was stolen."

b. Transparency/Honesty e.g.

- i. "I think people need to stand up and admit or whatever."
- ii. "If you're not giving it back. At least admit it."
- iii. "they can you know at least be honest about it"

c. Context e.g.

- i. "it adds context further to the journey of the piece of work"

- ii. "I feel like it's interesting. It's part of the story. It's not like judgment. Not judgment, but it's relevant."
- iii. "Like there's, what's the point of going to a museum if it's not looking at historical pieces and finding more context? It's an important part of the context, especially in a country like the US"

d. Accountability e.g.

- i. "being accountable for what you're stealing yeah and like having even if you don't know how to make amends yet or returning that piece but yeah just mainly accountability"
- ii. "that doesn't make sense to me to hold them responsible."
- iii. "Are you going to take responsibility for the past? Are you going to correct this or are you just going to say well they did it, I didn't?"

e. Educational e.g.

- i. "I think it would bring awareness of just in educating."
- ii. "So much of the history we're taught as kids is so inaccurate. And it's like, oh, don't pay attention to the sins of our founding fathers."
- iii. "I think that would help people understand. It would be part of the education process if they did."

f. Distrust e.g.

- i. "One of the tricky things is that like it's not hard to weaponize Seattle progressive things so saying that something is stolen and putting it on display and then doing nothing about it is a pretty good profit-minded move to do."

- ii. “I just don't see anybody unethically stealing something, and then publicly admitting that they were stolen so it's just, it's unlikely that they would say that and make themselves look bad.”

9. On a scale from 1-7, where 1 is completely disagree and 7 is completely agree, do you think that museums should provide clarifying information for objects that have a disputed or unknown history? Explain your rating.

a. Expected/Standard e.g.

- i. “oh yeah i feel like i've seen that before”

b. Interesting e.g.

- i. “I think it's a good fact to know.”
- ii. “Yeah. I like that information. I guess I would even be interested in if they had a guess of what they thought.”
- iii. “I think disputed stories are against interesting to have. I'll throw it all in there. Yeah, it's just adding more lore to it.”

c. Opportunity for New Information e.g.

- i. “I'd want them to check in with the country and say, "Hey, this is yours. We have something." We have this and we don't know why.”

d. Transparency/Honesty e.g.

- i. “I think that's just like something that's very it's very honest.”
- ii. “Like, if you don't know, then you just say you don't know. But if you do know, you should say it.”
- iii. “I don't think museums will ever be hurt by transparency”

e. Distrust e.g.

- i. "i wouldn't believe it was true. i wouldn't trust because i actually prefer to hide something so i don't like the gaps"
- ii. "I mean, it's, it's that that would be a scapegoat as well just to be like, Oh, we don't know."

f. Educational e.g.

- i. "i'm teaching children history you know things are not we're not going to go black and white this might not be this might be an instance where we don't know and that's okay to be in the unknown"
- ii. "because it also displays that history is not always concrete. And I think it's really nice to kind of have it be more upfront that there are, there are pieces that you can know. There's uncertainty."

10. On a scale from 1-7, where 1 is completely disagree and 7 is completely agree, do you think that museums should provide provenance information for objects that have been requested to be returned to their community of origin? Explain your rating.

a. Transparency/Honesty e.g.

- i. "I feel like. I mean, the best case scenario would be that the museum returns it, but you know, having that information out there, at least let other people know that this is what it is."
- ii. "Transparency. That's what it's all about."
- iii. "it's not great for promo but it's important in terms of honesty."

b. Public Feedback e.g.

- i. “I think that enough visibility on something like that, especially coming back into the museum as feedback from visitors, it might change a tie.”
- ii. “whether or not it's, like, a peaceful boycott of the museum, or vandalizing the museum, maybe as a result of, like, the learning this information of, like, why wouldn't you give it back to who it belongs to?”
- iii. “No. I think that shouldn't be our fault.”
- iv. “but do you expect the public to then to go advocate then saying so is there going to be then is the next step if you feel strongly that this should go back”

c. Accountability e.g.

- i. “then it's like why do you even still have it? why do you still have this? it goes back to the accountability. that feels like you're just pointedly being disrespectful if you're not even saying they want this back”

d. Legitimacy of Claim e.g.

- i. “I think it would be wise for the museum to consider the likely veracity of the request. Yes. And I don't think, I mean, I think there are a lot of crackpots who are going out trying to say, oh, you know, my great, that was my great-grandmother's piece, but they don't have any way of saying that or proving that.”

- ii. “assuming it's like a valid request, right like yeah well you know assuming it's you know got some credibility not just you know random person on the street”

e. Expected/Standard e.g.

- i. “Yes, I've seen that. Yeah. Well, you know, at the Met? Yeah. They have it. They have labels saying this or that is in contention.”

f. Irrelevance e.g.

- i. “That's irrelevant to the art, to the origination of itself, because that's kind of... Like a political... It's more of a political kind of issue than, like, the history of the object.”
- ii. “Don't air their dirty laundry. People like drama, though. That's part of the story. If it is drama. If there is drama.”
- iii. “I think that's the deal with the museum and whoever is requesting it yeah I don't think it's like a visitor, I feel like that's that's the museums yeah that's like a behind the scenes”

g. Last Chance e.g.

- i. “Because then people would want to catch that object before it leaves the museum.”
- ii. “I feel like it would attract more people to come in a way to have like, this won't be here for long because it needs to be returned.”

11. Where would you expect to find provenance information for a museum object?

a. Label e.g.

- i. “just on the bottom of the label”

ii. "So in the little index information"

iii. "I feel like right next to the piece."

b. Wall text/other text e.g.

i. "that could be part of like the opener"

ii. "like at the entrance"

c. Website e.g.

i. "you can connect to their apps and connect to the pieces online."

ii. "more information online if you want to look it up"

d. Code/Symbol e.g.

i. "a big card in the beginning of the hall that has a color code"

ii. "it may not need to be represented in words like if there's some sort of symbol like a little tag"

iii. "i think that there should be a color coding that would tell you"

iv. "Like a symbol like this. You know, a spice meter."

e. QR Code/Link e.g.

i. "but in the moment if I can get my phone out scan a quick little QR code and can read yeah if you would like to know more"

ii. "like a QR code so if there's a hint like if it says complicated history or yeah question you have the opportunity"

f. Other interpretive methods e.g.

i. "Like in an audio."

- ii. “it could be a little catalog with that information. You could pick it up when you get into the museum, and then, but you don't have to if you're not interested.”
- iii. “like in an accessible format audio guide

